

Environmental Tobacco Smoke (1/23/87)

Status

Environmental Tobacco Smoke (ETS) (aka passive smoking, ambient smoke, sidestream smoke, and involuntary smoking) has been a legal issue since 1975 when eight states enacted restrictions on smoking in public places other than elevators. These early smoking restrictions were motivated primarily by the annoyance rather than any scientific evidence of health effects. However, the anti-smokers and media attention given to the purported effects of ETS on health have persuaded forty states, over 600 localities, and hundreds of businesses to restrict smoking in the workplace and other public places. The federal government is considering banning smoking on commercial flights, among military personnel, and in government buildings. The 1986 Surgeon General's Report asserted that ETS "can cause" lung cancer in non-smokers.

Summary Arguments

The first Surgeon General's Report on Smoking and Health in 1964 addressed (ETS), but admitted that more research was needed. The 1979 Surgeon General Report stated that "healthy nonsmokers exposed to cigarette smoke have little or no physiological response to smoke." This report also called for more research. Between 1983 and 1984, 65 internationally known physicians and scientists met three times to address the health effects of passive smoking and concluded, collectively and independently, that no conclusion can be made about whether (ETS) has any health effect on nonsmokers.

In 1986 reports of the National Research Council and the Surgeon General clearly rejected any significant connection between non-smoker ETS exposure and cardiovascular disease, chronic obstructive lung disease or acute respiratory disease (asthma). The Surgeon General's report did assert that ETS exposure "can cause lung cancer" in non-smokers. However, that conclusion was largely political in character. Of the 13 studies reviewed by the report, only 3 showed any statistically significant relation between ETS exposure and lung cancer in non-smokers. These studies are tainted by misclassification of former smokers as non-smokers which accounts for all the supposed ETS related lung cancer. Moreover, in a private communication to a public health official in January 1986, the Surgeon General admitted that the "currently available data do not support a conclusion that exposure to environmental tobacco smoke represents a health hazard."

Finally, none of the 3 studies examined ETS exposure effects outside the home. Indeed, if ETS were treated as any other environmental pollutant, the EPA would impose no restriction on exposure because its health effects are negligible.

Impact

The ETS issue has become the principal force behind the anti-smoking movement's effort to proscribe smoking and ostracize smokers. Despite its non-effect on non-smokers, ETS is the most powerful weapon the zealots have in their crusade.

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